



ALBERTINA NUGTEREN - RELIGION AND NATURE

Albertina Nugteren, in her long-lasting engagement with both religion and nature, focuses on the ways in which the two are interacting both in thought and in practice. In her book *Belief, Bounty, and Beauty. Rituals around Sacred Trees in India* she researched the interaction of material and symbolic values regarding forests, woods, and sacred trees, as well as the use of sacrificial wood for ritual purposes and the production of sacred images. In the various chapters, she moves from cosmic trees in Indian creation myths towards historic forests in which kings went hunting with their retinue; from consecrated axes with which divinely selected trees were cut down in order to serve in the sacrificial fire, as image of the deity, or in the construction of a temple, towards classic characters in traditional dramas who, in their varying moods, express all nuances between delight and dejection in the year-round cycles of the seasons as they manifest in the trees; from the historical Buddha whose biography is linked with trees in all the major moments of his life, towards mythic Krishna whose dead body is supposed to have come floating down the river and to have stranded in Puri in the form of a fossilised log; and from rituals around sacred trees at practically every corner in present-day India, towards various environmental mobilisation processes in which India's treasure trove of sacred texts, the tree motif in temple art, and the glorified customs of indigenous people are being used selectively to 'prove' how eco-friendly the Vedic-Hindu ancestors were. By presenting samples from 3,000 years of Indian ritual practice, it is shown that in many sacred geographies trees continue to connect the present with the past, the material with the symbolic, and the contemporarily ecological with the traditionally sacred.

As a critical note, however, it is pointed out that many of the ancient texts to which today's environmental lobbyists refer are directly or indirectly connected with the cutting down of trees. Various well-intended but naïve considerations about India's supposed ecological awareness in ancient scriptures are now being applied as incentives to face contemporary problems inspired by selectively read passages from the textual heritage.

On various occasions, such as during conferences (Delhi, Gainesville, San Diego, Nijmegen, Perth, Thimphu) and in several publications, as well as through her participation in the international forum Religion and Nature, and in its *Journal for the Study of Religion, Nature, and Culture*, Albertina Nugteren has articulated the need for an academic restraint in this. Mining the religious heritage with the objective to find inspiration for the management of contemporary issues invariably results in an uncritical, selective, and anachronous reproduction of undeniably noble imagery. That in environmental matters such inspiration based on the religious past may be both successful and highly ambivalent at the same time impels the scholar to take a critical stance.